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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 004065

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECPS](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS ON THE STATE OF PRESS FREEDOM

REF: BAGHDAD 1082

Classified By: DEPUTY POLITICAL COUNSELOR ELLEN GERMAIN, FOR REASONS 1.  
4 (B,D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Broadcast and print journalists in Baghdad reported that the government, political parties, and religious leaders were attempting to control the content of their reports during a series of meetings during October and November. Seven journalists who have worked for a variety of television networks such as Al-Hurrah, Al-Arabiyya, and Al-Iraqiyya and newspapers such as Al-Mashriq and Al-Safeer described threats they have experienced in connection with their employment, including one instance of kidnapping. They have coped with threats in different ways such as self-censoring, going into hiding, and in some cases, applying for refugee status in the U.S. They complained that journalists' organizations such as the Journalists Trade Union and the Iraqi Association for Defending the Rights of Journalists are ineffective and corrupt. They noted that while the Iraqi government is too weak to protect journalists, there are papers and news channels (besides the U.S.-sponsored Al-Hurrah channel) that seem to report independently. END SUMMARY.

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POLITICAL PRESSURE ON BROADCAST JOURNALISTS  
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¶2. (C) During a series of meetings with PolOff in October and November, journalists Rafel Mehdi (Al-Hurrah), Falah Al-Thahabi (Al-Hurrah), Asa'd Al-Rubaie (Al-Iraqiyya), Dhia Al-Nasiri (Al-Arabiyya), and print journalists Firas Al-Hamdani, Rahim Abed Salman, and Qasim Al-Shammari said that the government, political parties and religious leaders have pressured them in order to control the content of their reports. Asa'd Al-Rubaie, an Al-Iraqiyya correspondent and scriptwriter, alleged October 23 that Prime Minister Maliki's media advisor Yasseen Majeed was controlling operations in Al-Iraqiyya by making direct phone calls to news directors. He noted, for example, there was one time when the PM's office ordered news directors to stop broadcasting coverage of a political official it opposed. Al-Rubaie also alleged that Al-Iraqiyya Director General Habib al-Sadr, using underlings who implement his orders, was changing facts in news reports because he is loyal to some religious leaders who are his relatives. (Note: Habib al-Sadr told PolOff November 8 that his sister is Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) leader Abdulaziz al-Hakim's wife and the mother of Amar al-Hakim. He noted he is a distant relative of Moqtada al-Sadr. End note.) According to Al-Rubaie the top leadership of Al-Iraqiyya belongs to religious parties, and most of the staff of Al-Iraqiyya's staff of 3,000 is cooperating with Habib al-Sadr's orders, because they are afraid of him.

13. (C) In a separate conversation on December 7 with Hiwa Osman, President Talabani's Media Advisor, Osman said Habib al-Sadr, while himself a secular individual, tries to curry favor with all politicians and religious figures to retain his tenuous hold on his position as Director of the IMN Board of Governors. Osman said al-Sadr frequently calls politicians to let them know about planned news coverage and to elicit their input into programming. Osman also said Habib al-Sadr moves around Baghdad with a large personal security contingent and that he has allowed Al-Iraqiyya to become more and more sectarian, allowing, for example, Shi'a music to be played during intercessory periods between major programs. Osman also speculated that if Habib al-Sadr is replaced in the coming months, his likely successor will be the current head of the Al-Anwar channel, who is a Shi'a religious leader.

14. (C) Al-Rubaie noted that some media workers at Al-Iraqiyya misunderstand the concept of public broadcasting and think that the station is supposed to promote the government; therefore, the network does not report on government failures, particularly due to interference from political groups -- primarily Etilaf, and specifically ISCI. While the staff includes Sunnis, Kurds, Christians, and Shi'a, he observed, "The direction of Iraqiyya is in fact always praising Shi'a". Al-Rubaie also expressed frustration that he wanted to cover issues such as displacement and poverty accurately; however, his supervisor deleted many facets of his reports.

15. (C) Dhia Al-Nasiri, the Director for Al-Arabiyya (pan-Arab station broadcasted from Dubai) in the International Zone, similarly noted October 28 that most reporters especially those at Al-Iraqiyya, complain about Maliki media advisor

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Majeed's interference. He alleged that Majeed has a say regarding who is employed at Al-Iraqiyya and that the PM's office pressures Iraqiyya producers, who remain silent because they are supporting families. He stated that while the PM's Office has pressured Al-Arabiyya, Al-Arabiyya owner Sheikh Waslid al-Ibrahim (who is Saudi) has pushed back and no one has been fired. Al-Nasiri said that the government's excuse for closing Al-Arabiyya around Ramadan last year was that a series of anti-government news stories were "incorrect." He said that when he negotiated Al-Arabiyya's reopening from Lebanon, Yaseen Majeed pressed Al-Arabiyya to transfer certain correspondents out of Iraq or stop operating in Iraq. While Al-Arabiyya refused to transfer correspondents, it promised the government it would broadcast retractions if there were errors in the future. (Note: The GOI closed the Baghdad bureau of Al-Arabiyya on September 7, 2006 for approximately a month for "sectarian" reporting. At the time, Yasseen Majeed publicly stated "If Al-Qaeda wanted reporters to work for it, it could do no better than the reporters at Al-Arabiyya." End note.) However, Al-Nasiri noted that the government had not bothered him since Al-Arabiyya assigned him to his current position just before Ramadan (October 13). In a conversation on November 8, Yassen Majeed admitted that he calls Al-Iraqiyya to complain about stories he believes are of poor quality, "because it is funded by public money."

16. (C) Al-Hurrah Director Falah Al-Thahabi and political correspondent Rafel Mehdi told PolOff October 12 that in their opinion, political parties do not think they can control Al-Hurrah's reports, because they believe the station is American. Al-Thahabi and Mehdi said that their reports have drawn criticism from Council of Representatives members. Al-Thahabi said that (CoR) Speaker Mahmoud Mashadani (National Dialogue Council/Tawafuq) stated during one CoR session "We know very well that Al-Hurrah is the agent for the occupiers" after Al-Hurrah broadcasted a story about a document leaked from the CoR on income increases for parliamentarians and highlighted the discrepancy between parliamentarians' high salaries and those of regular people.

Mehdi said CoR members criticized her for reporting their absence from CoR sessions on the pension law.

¶7. (C) Commenting on other networks broadcasting in Iraq, Al-Thahabi and Mehdi noted that there is a sectarian dimension to all reporting; any media person who belongs to a party must support the party's opinions; and journalists identified as having a particular point of view are at risk of being targeted by the respective opposition parties. They noted Iraqis know the political slant of the various stations broadcasting in Iraq and provided the following examples: Al-Masdar supports the Dawa party; Al-Furat supports ISCI; Al-Hurriyah supports Kurds; Baghdad supports the IIP; and Al-Iraqiyya has a pro-Sh'ia slant. They said that no one knows the names of Al-Baghdadiyah's owners, who are rumored to be ex-Ba'athists. Al-Thahabi and Mehdi identified Al-Sumeriyah and Nahrain as ideologically and politically independent. (Al-Rubaie separately told PolOff he also considers Al-Sumeriyah ideologically independent.) Al-Thahabi and Mehdi also reported that provincial governors are protective of their image and threaten journalists who provide negative coverage.

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POLITICAL PRESSURE ON PRINT JOURNALISTS  
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¶8. (C) On November 14, three print journalists Firas Al-Hamdani, Qasim Al-Shammari, and Rahim Abed Salman who have written for various papers such as Al-Mashriq, Al-Safeer, and Salaam Al-Rafadain met with PolOff to discuss their perspectives on press freedom. Al-Shammari said that until 2006 there was relatively more freedom in writing than after that time. He stated that nowadays if he writes about government corruption and names ministry officials, the ministry will send people to talk to him. Noting that all political parties pressure journalists, Al-Shammari said that there have also been cases in which representatives of parliamentarians have visited journalists at their offices to threaten them after they write columns about CoR members. He also noted that some newspaper owners have closed their papers to avoid threats. Firas Al-Hamdani commented that he cannot write articles about militias, although he feels he can write very freely about PM Maliki.

¶9. (C) Rahim Abed Salman, who is also a Ministry of Culture employee, said that he recently emerged from hiding after eight months, because one column that he wrote in the Salaam al-Rafadain paper cited interference of Iranians in Iraqi matters. Salman explained that a group of old religious men,

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with whom he shares family ties, told him after he wrote the article to stop writing or his life would be at risk. According to Salman, they asked why he was writing such things about a religious country (Iran), accused him of being secular, and asked him if he was praying. Salman maintained that he only referenced Iran as one example of foreign interference in his article, in addition to Syria, Jordan, and other countries.

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THREATS AND TARGETING  
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¶10. (C) The broadcast and print journalists gave personal accounts of threats and targeting they have experienced. Al-Rubaie, who lives in Sadr City, said he receives threatening calls from blocked numbers at night and some people have told his brother he will pay for working for Iraqiyya with his life. Al-Rubaie said that if any members of the Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) militia saw his US military issued Combined Press Information Center (CPIC) identification card, they would kill him. When Ayad Allawi was prime minister, Al-Rubaie showed his face on television, but says he now only does voiceover reports. He also noted

that most channels in Baghdad have received threats from radical groups, militia, Al-Qae'da, and other people who like to create chaos. Arabiyya reporter Al-Nasiri said he originally left Iraq for Lebanon in February 2005 after Al-Qae'da killed 12 of his colleagues. Al-Nasiri said that he recently returned to Iraq and can work more freely than other reporters, because he lives in the International Zone and his family is in Lebanon.

¶11. (C) Al-Hurrah journalists Al-Thahabi and Mehdi reported that Al-Qaeda and JAM targets journalists even if they are neutral, because of the notion that journalists are foreign agents. Regular citizens who feel that the government is ineffective also blame journalists and beat, threaten, and sometimes kill them. Al-Thahabi noted that some journalists are obliged to leave the country and they believe the most endangered journalists work for Al-Hurrah, which is targeted by political parties, regular people, and police since the channel is American-backed. They explained that there is a perception that President Bush is contacting them directly to tell them what to report. Nevertheless, they said they are trying to show people that it is a neutral channel and Al-Hurrah is the best known channel, which even people in Ramadi are viewing. On the other hand, because Al-Hurrah journalists are the best known, they are good targets for armed groups when Al-Hurrah shows facts that anger them. Hiwa Osman, Media Advisor to President Talabanbi, also said despite its affiliation with the USG, many Iraqis are now tuning into the Al-Hurrah television channel because it is increasingly perceived as the most objective television news outlet in the country. He said in his view and the view of many other educated, middle-class Iraqis, Al-Hurrah has become the de facto "BBC, or Public Service Broadcaster," for Iraq, which was the role the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) or Al-Iraqiyya was supposed, but has so far failed, to fill. He said Iraqis still tune into Al-Iraqiyah to get general public announcements from the GOI, but they are increasingly tuning into Al-Hurrah for their domestic and international news content.

¶12. (C) Al-Thahabi said he lives in the Meridien Hotel, rather than his home in Sadr City, which Iranian intelligence and JAM largely controls, for safety. He said one time when he was leaving the hotel he realized there was an armed group waiting to kidnap him and went back into the hotel. Al-Thahabi assessed that most of the threats comes from religious parties, since he receives threats when he makes reports criticizing religious leaders. For example, he said the Sh'ia Thar-Allah (Vengeance of God) party from Basrah and the Iraqi Hezbollah party have threatened him. Al-Thahabi said that to cope with threats, he changes drivers, routes, times of transit, and he changes his appearance. Mehdi said her entire family has left Iraq and she changes the places she stays. They said their colleagues have had similar experiences. Al-Thahabi and Mehdi said they agreed they should seek refugee status in the U.S. and expressed their belief that Al-Hurrah's management is not adequately addressing their safety concerns.

¶13. (C) Qasim Al-Shammari, who used to be a director working for the Al-Mashriq paper, said that a year ago, people who appeared to be intelligence officers surrounded him with several cars and kidnapped him in broad daylight in the Palestine Street area (near Sadr City) in Baghdad. Al-Shammari stated that friends and family paid 20,000 USD for his release two days after his kidnapping. He said his

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kidnappers accused him of being an American agent, but he was unable to determine their identities. Firas Al-Hamdani told PolOff that while he himself has not been threatened, in 2004 a gang that accused him of working for the Americans kidnapped his son and held him for 23 days.

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JOURNALISTS TRADE UNION

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¶14. (C) The journalists consistently complained that the Iraqi Union for Journalists does nothing to assist journalists with the dangers that they face. (Note: Union chair Shihab al-Timimi has said that Saddam Hussein's son Uday headed the union during the regime and that the union has over 3,000 members. End note). Al-Hurrah reporters Al-Thahabi and Mehdi, who are union members, said that the union is not connected to the government any longer, but seeks support during meetings with political groups. Al-Thahabi said that Shihab al-Timimi asked Amar Al-Hakim for financial support during a meeting just before Ramadan. Newspaper reporters Al-Shammari, Salman, and Al-Hamdani, who are all union members, agreed that the only benefit of membership is an identification card stating they are journalists. They asserted that besides failing to support threatened journalists, the trade union is controlling access to conferences for journalists, and often often makes spots available to non-journalists. Salman noted that he tried in vain after the fall of the former regime to get the union involved in helping the families of targeted or martyred journalists who needed support.

¶15. (C) The union issues an identification card that Al Hamdani said a journalist is eligible for after three years of working as a journalist or after completing a degree in journalism. He said that there are three types of union identification cards -- participant, trainee, and member -- but did not outline the differences in benefits they each confer. Mehdi alleged that the union issued her a "trainee" rather than a "member" identification card in order to prevent her from being eligible for a share of land that belongs jointly to full union members; and Al-Shammari, Salman, and Al-Hamdani all said they heard that the union had sent a letter of inquiry to PM Maliki about distributing this piece of land.

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JOURNALISTS COMPLAIN NGO SUPPORT LACKING  
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¶16. (C) Commenting on NGO support for journalists, Al-Iraqiyya reporter Al-Rubaie complained that there are no NGOs offering adequate support to journalists. Newspaper reporters Al-Hamdani, Salman, and Al-Shammari alleged that the Iraqi Association for Defending the Rights of Journalists did not provide adequate support for journalists and that its head, Ibrahim Sarraji was responsible for financial corruption within the organization. They said they were forming an alternate NGO to assist all media workers, not only journalists. Separately, Al-Hurrah journalist Al-Thahabi also alleged to PolOff that the Iraqi Association for Defending the Rights of Journalists is corrupt and diverts donations from a Swiss journalist protection NGO.

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COMMENT  
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¶17. (C) This sampling of perspectives from Iraqi journalists working in Baghdad indicates that a combination of political pressure from the government, religious groups, and militias continues to undermine press freedom in Iraq. The consistent allegations of misconduct or corruption against the Iraqi Union of Journalists and the Iraqi Association for Defending the Rights of Journalists are disturbing. Post will continue to monitor the reports of governmental interference in press freedom and to press the GOI (and PM's Media Advisor Yasseen Majeed specifically) on the importance of upholding journalistic freedom in promoting democracy. We will also provide, in the coming few weeks, an analysis of the legislative framework that is now taking shape to replace CPA Orders 65 (which governs the Iraqi National Communications and Media Network) and 66 (which governs the Iraqi Media Network), as well as an initiative now underway by USG-grantee IREX to promulgate a general "Media Law," designed to codify protections for all journalists operating

in Iraq. END COMMENT.  
BUTENIS